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The Aesthetic Benefits of Agricultural Land

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The failure to address aesthetic conservation of farm land more comprehensively has been a real loss of opportunity. As management prescriptions were developed in the 1985 Food Security Act for the more than 30 million acres in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and potential easements on FmHA land, aesthetics could have been considered at the same time as soil and water and habitat conservation. CRT land could be not only ecologically sound, but attractive in a way that helps people appreciate its ecological quality. Our hope is that this opportunity will not be lost as the 1990 Farm Bill is developed and implemented.

Both urban and rural people take pleasure and satisfaction in how the rural landscape looks—and sounds and smells and even how it feels to travel through it. That pleasure and satisfaction come from the aesthetic quality of rural landscapes. The rural landscape offers something different and, in a way, something more than the scenic views we associate with

America's wilderness areas and parks. While many of us enjoy the scenic quality of rural landscapes - rolling hills, forests and fields, and meandering streams—we also enjoy a quality that

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especially characterizes the countryside: the appearance of good stewardship. My own research suggests—and the experience of colleagues around the country reinforces the suggestion—that people like the look of rural landscapes that are well cared for. So, rural lands can be attractive because they are scenic or because they show good stewardship. The 1990 Farm Bill could: (1) protect scenic rural landscapes and (2) create more attractive rural landscapes by making American farm land a more vivid demonstration of good stewardship.

Aesthetics complements issues that are a key to the success of the 1990 Farm Bill—it is not an extra or an add-on.

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FARMER PARTICIPATION IN CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

Aesthetics is important to participation in two ways. First, farmers care about the way their land looks. It reflects on them as farmers. Conservation measures that are designed to show that they are the work of a good farmer will be more readily adopted. In contrast, CRP cover and habitat restoration, as it has been typically installed under FSA 1985, can look neglected, can be mistaken for weeds or show poor care.

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Careful design of these measures will be more likely to give the farmer and his neighbors something of which they can be proud.

Second, aesthetics is an important reason for targeting conservation to types of lands that were not eligible for the 1985 CRP and for allowing economic use, including cropping on some conservation land. Scenic rural landscapes very often have been cropped only selectively, respecting constraints imposed by topography and soils. Consequently, land with no cropping history, but with high aesthetic quality, could be eligible for aesthetic conservation. In addition, land that looks well cared for may very well be cropped. For example, strip-cropped fields are recognized among the most beautiful landscapes in Minnesota, where I live. So, land where conservation measures appropriate to soil type have been implemented and where those conservation measures are highly noticeable (so that people can appreciate the conservation that is going on) could also be eligible for aesthetic conservation.

RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Aesthetic conservation supports tourism, a cornerstone of rural economic development. We must realize that rural tourism can take many forms. Driving to a countryside produce stand can be motivated as much by the experience of getting there and being in the country as by the need for vegetables. More direct tourism includes hiking, biking, skiing, snowmobiling, boating, hunting, fishing and even a growing agro-leisure industry with bed-and-breakfast and guest farm establishments. This kind of economic development allows rural areas to maintain their essential character, while introducing a new economic pursuit. It helps people stay on their farms and in their towns. Notable examples of the economic development

potential of rural aesthetic quality are Napa County, California, where tourism accounted for \$135 million of income in 1984 and Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where tourism accounted for \$416 million of income in 1987.

Rural landscapes also are highly efficient settings for expanding the recreational resources of the nation. Linear recreation systems (roads where people drive for pleasure, trails, streams) are a network through the countryside. Their desirability depends on views from that network to rural landscapes. Most of this land is privately owned, yet we all enjoy the privilege of looking at it. Aesthetic conservation would pragmatically ensure our continued enjoyment of this benefit, and the continued attractiveness of our extensive public linear recreation system.

MAINTAINING OPEN SPACES

Aesthetic conservation of rural areas makes nearby cities more desirable places to live. The nations of northern Europe, where people have long recognized the necessary, complementary relationship between urban and rural landscapes, have used the skills of landscape architects to maintain the aesthetic and ecological character of their rural landscapes for decades (Westmcott 1974 1984, Bruns and Luz 1989).

In the United States, the phrase "open space" seems to be something of a surrogate for aesthetic concerns in state and local farm land legislation and ordinances. It is no coincidence that, while all 50 states have enacted some form of farm land protection legislation, those that explicitly address the open space benefits of farm land are clustered in the most heavily urbanized areas of the country—New England and California.

If scenic qualities of rural landscapes are protected and more attractive conservation landscapes are created by the

1990 Farm Bill, the open space resources of urban areas will be protected and extended at the same time. Clearly, urban and rural people share an interest in farmland, not only when they shop for produce, but also when they enjoy the wide open landscape. We must protect farm land *and* we must protect its aesthetic quality if it is to serve as an open space resource.

IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation devices for the aesthetic conservation concept could vary widely. They could be incorporated with CRP and FmHA easement components of FSA 1985. Or particular regions, identified for their scenic quality, economic development needs or proximity to urban areas could be selected as eligible for aesthetic conservation.

Certainly, conservation lands must be managed in an interdisciplinary framework, including the aesthetic orientation of landscape architecture along with the crucial professional insights of wildlife biologists, soil scientists and agricultural engineers, to protect and improve the full, long-term productivity of the landscape. This interdisciplinary mix is standard in much of Europe, where people have had to confront the finite nature of rural land resources.

THE GOAL

Our primary goal should be to enlarge the purpose of land management incentives in the 1990 Farm Bill so that greater benefits are received—benefits of stronger rural economies, more respect for farmers' pride in their lands and their farming, healthier urban regions, and more options for conservation management—all increasing the ecological diversity and aesthetic quality of the rural landscape. «